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ABSTRACT

The Master of Arts in Professional Writing (MAPW) offered by Carnegie Mellon University (Pennsylvania) is designed for students who want careers as document designers in industry and government, where they will plan, write, and evaluate computer manuals and on-line documentation, training and instructional materials, technical reports, and a wide range of internal and external communications (forms, brochures, newsletters, public relations releases). The MAPW prepares students for several possible points of entry into a professional writing career by developing their understanding of the most frequently occurring problems in professional communication. The program requires three semesters of course work in writing, rhetorical theory, linguistics, visual design, and computer technology. It also requires a professional internship with a corporation, government agency, consulting firm, university, or other commercial or research organization. To receive the MAPW degree, students must complete 36 credit hours of approved course work with an average grade of "B" or better and the professional internship (one credit hour). Through courses, the internship, and research and teaching assistantships on campus, the MAPW program seeks to develop in students (1) a refinement of writing, reading, and critical skills; (2) an understanding of rhetorical theories that pertain to the processes of composing and communication; (3) a more sensitive understanding of the structures and practices of English discourse; and (4) an understanding of the role of visual design in communications and a knowledge of the relationship between verbal and visual communication. (AEW)

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CDC Technical Report No. 33

The Evolution of a Graduate Writing Program: The Master of Arts in Professional Writing at Carnegie Mellon University

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February 1987

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The Communications Design Center was established in 1979 to solve communication problems in business, industry, government, and the professions.

The goals of the Center are:

- to encourage interdisciplinary approaches to solving visual and verbal communication problems;
- to promote cooperation between communication researchers at the University and those outside the University who have practical interests in communication problems;
- to provide resources and an organizational setting for research in visual and verbal communication;
- to train professional writers; researchers, and teachers;
- to promote the development of educational materials for communication programs on and off the CMU campus.

This report is one of a series from our on-going research on communication and document design. If you have questions or comments on this report, or if you would like to find out more about the activities of the CDC, contact:

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The Evolution of a Graduate Writing Program: The Master of Arts in Professional Writing at Carnegie Mellon University

Granville H. Jones and Erwin R. Steinberg

In response to a growing need in industry for writers, Carnegie Mellon University (then Carnegie Institute of Technology) began a program for the B.S. in Technical Writing and Editing in 1958. Demand for new technical writers continued to be steady through the 1960s, but began to increase noticeably in the 1970s--due, primarily, to two developments:

1. the public's increasing demand to understand the information about products it consumed and the legal documents it signed, and
2. the computer industry's expansion into the consumer market.

Thus as the consumer movement grew, so did insistence that people be able to understand warranties, patient package inserts, and computer manuals. An increasingly literate middle-class became increasingly impatient with being forced to sign loan forms it couldn't understand, deal with government documents it had to hire lawyers to translate, and use poorly written manuals to try to make newly purchased computers fulfill the glowing promises that the manufacturers made.

Continued frustration by the public led to demands that the government "do something", and in the late 1970s government at several levels did. In 1978, the New York State legislature passed the first "plain language law." Since then, seven other states have followed suit. At about the same time, President Carter issued Executive Order 12044, designed "to make Federal regulations clearer, less burdensome, and more cost effective" (March 1978).

As part of the same Federal movement, the National Institute of Education issued a request for a proposal to foster clear and simple writing and design of government documents. From the

submissions, NIE chose, and in September of 1978 funded, the Document Design Project, undertaken by a consortium of the American Institutes for Research (Washington, DC), Siegel & Gale (New York City), and Carnegie Mellon University (Pittsburgh, PA).

New Graduate Programs

The Ph.D in Rhetoric

One of Carnegie Mellon's responsibilities in that project was "to design a graduate training program for document design scientists." In response, the English Department, with support from the Psychology and Design Departments, developed two interrelated degrees: a Ph.D in Rhetoric and a M.A. in Professional Writing. The Ph.D in Rhetoric at Carnegie Mellon is considerably different from other degrees with the same title. The CMU Ph.D focuses on problems in the processes of composing and comprehending discourse throughout the history of rhetoric and in contemporary "new rhetorics." The study of theory development and cognitive, problem-solving methods is conjoined with the study of historical, critical, and empirical methods and with practice in research. Students who plan to work in government, business, and industry also study principles of visual design and can undertake internships for practical experience and develop dissertations that stem from problems in government, business, and industry.

By interrelating humanistic and social-scientific methods, and by stressing the need for both study of theory and practice in research, the Ph.D. in Rhetoric at CMU is uniquely designed to solve a broad variety of communication problems. From the program, students have gone on to teach writing, rhetoric and document design in colleges and universities, or they have gone into industry as researchers in document design, writers, or managers of documentation groups.

The Master of Arts in Professional Writing

The Master of Arts in Professional Writing (MAPW) is specifically designed for students who want careers as document designers in industry and government, where they plan, write, and evaluate computer manuals and on-line documentation, training and instructional materials, technical reports, and a wide range of internal and external communications (forms, brochures, newsletters, public relations releases). The MAPW prepares students for several possible points

of entry into a professional writing career by developing their understanding of the most frequently occurring problems in professional communication and improving their analytical and problem-solving abilities.

The program normally requires three semesters of course work in writing, rhetorical theory, linguistics, visual design, and computer technology. It also requires a Professional Internship in a corporation, government agency, consulting firm, university, or other commercial or research organization. The internship provides students with a clearer understanding of professional writing and opportunities to integrate and employ the knowledge and skills acquired in course work. It is usually taken during the summer after one or two semesters of course work, though some students have done extended, six-month internships.

Through courses, the internship, and research and teaching assistantships on campus, the MAPW program seeks to develop several kinds of knowledge and skill:

- A refinement of writing, reading, and critical skills.
- An understanding of rhetorical theories that offer explanations of the processes of composing and communication and, hence, provide the basis for carrying out these processes more effectively.
- A more sensitive understanding of the various structures and practices of English discourse.
- An understanding of the role of visual design in communications and a knowledge of the relationship between visual and verbal communication.

The MAPW program is open to both full-time and part-time students. Full-time students normally receive partial tuition remission and are able to earn additional support as research assistants, as teaching assistants, or in another professionally related activity. Although most students in the program have earned undergraduate degrees in English, others have come from engineering, science, business, and social science backgrounds. To receive the MAPW degree, students must complete 36 credit hours of approved course work with an average grade of "B" or better and the Professional Internship (1 credit hour).

Curriculum

Writing (three courses required). Suggested Courses:

Professional and Technical Writing (required)
Planning and Testing Documents
Magazine Writing
Journalism
Nonfiction Workshop

Rhetoric (one course required)

Rhetoric in Social Interaction
Contemporary Rhetorical Theory
Contemporary Theories of Invention
Historical Perspectives in Rhetorical Theory
Rhetoric and Dialectic

Linguistics (one course required)

Introduction to Discourse Analysis
Sociolinguistics
Prescriptive Linguistics

Visual Design (two courses required)

Fundamentals of Graphic Design or approved substitution
Introduction to Graphic Communications I
Typography I

Computer Science (one course required)

Computer and Rhetorical Studies or other approved
Computer Science course

Electives (normally three of four courses)

After discussions with their advisor, students choose additional courses in the required areas or courses in other appropriate areas--for example, psychology, industrial management, literary studies, statistics, etc.

Professional Internship:

The Department normally arranges a three-month, full-time summer internship for the student as a writer, researcher, or document analyst in a corporation, government agency, or consulting firm. Students are usually paid in full-time internships, but CMU does not guarantee a paid internship at the location and with

the professional emphasis a students may desire. In some cases students who already have jobs may fulfill the internship requirement with an appropriate on-the-job project; such arrangements require the approval of the student's advisor. The internship is a one-credit-hour course for which tuition is charged.

Students, companies who hire MAPW interns, and companies who hire graduates of the MAPW program are all pleased with the practical experience the internships provide. Equally important is the training that full-time MAPW's (and some Ph.D students) get in the projects for the Communications Design Center (CDC) during their three semesters at CMU.

Research and Training: The Communications Design Center

Founded in 1979, the CDC is an interdisciplinary group of writers, researchers, designers, psychologists, and computer scientists. The goals of the Center are:

1. to encourage interdisciplinary approaches to the solution of visual and verbal communication problems;

2. to promote cooperation between communication researchers at the University and those outside the University in business, government, and the professions who have practical interests in communications problems;

3. to provide resources and an organizational setting for research in visual and verbal communication;

4. to train professional writers, researchers, and teachers, and to promote the development of educational materials for communication programs on and off the CMU campus;

5. to produce clear computer documentation that people can easily use, understand, and remember.

Some of the projects the CDC has undertaken are:

- *TOPS-20 operating system manuals (Volumes 1 and 2) for novice users.* TOPS is the computer operating system used by most faculty, staff, and students at CMU.

- *Executive Information System (EIS) manuals for CMU administrators.* The EIS manuals describe the TOPS operating system for CMU administrators, whose computer skills range from novice to expert.

- *SPICE computing environment for the Computer Science Department.* This manual describes the Accent Operating System on the Perq computer.

- *CADAM manual*, a computer-aided design and manufacturing system developed by Lockheed and marketed by IBM. This manual combines clear language with heavy emphasis on graphic elements.

- *IBM-PC manual for novice users.* This manual was contracted for the CMU computer Store because people were having difficulty understanding and using the manuals that came with the IBM-PC.

- *Guidelines for Preparing Technical Documentation.* This technical writers' style manual prepared for Allen-Bradley describes goals and presents guidelines for product documentation for Allen-Bradley's industrial computer group.

The CDC also undertakes smaller projects like designing brochures and providing documentation for equipment and for training programs.

In providing documentation, the Communications Design Center uses the following principles:

- The documentation process is a team process: the team members are experts trained in areas such as writing, graphic design, computer science, and human factors.

- The team works together to produce the best possible draft of the documentation.

- The documentation is then evaluated for ease of use, understandability, and memorability.

To evaluate computer manuals and other kinds of products, the CDC has developed an editing system called Protocol-Aided Revision. A reading protocol is a record of a user reading a document and making continuous verbal responses to the text. The protocol sessions are recorded on audio or video tape for later analysis. Because they are collected while actual drafts

of manuals are being used, reading protocols provide much more explicit and diagnostic information for revision than do users' comments after a session at the computer or other kind of equipment.

Conclusion

Through the M.A. in Professional Writing, the Ph.D. in Rhetoric, and the Communications Design Center, Carnegie Mellon is training professional writers, document designers, and teachers of writing, rhetoric, and document design for position in the academic and the professional worlds. In their classes, their internships, and the CDC, students study and apply theory continuously and simultaneously.

As they relate theory to practice, language to visual design, and classroom work to research and practical activities, MAPW students mature quickly to take on the responsibilities of writing and evaluating documentation. Graduates of the program have gone to work for such high-tech firms as IBM, AT&T, Westinghouse Allen-Bradley, and Data General, and for such document design firms as Siegel & Gale and Richardson/Smith.